

IN MEMORY OF A MENTOR

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Twenty years ago I was a confused young scientist. Five years into my graduate studies in astronomy, I fit the classic stereotype of a distracted graduate student. The focus of my preoccupation was carnivorous plants.

I was a beginner in the carnivorous plant community, and my plant collection was microscopic. I wrote a few minor articles for Carnivorous Plant Newsletter (CPN), while I read, reread (and re-reread) my copies of books by Lloyd, Schnell, and Slack. Unfortunately, even those benchmark resources seemed to fall short of authoritativeness whenever *Utricularia* species were involved. This deficiency was further reflected in CPN travelogue articles—while explorers reported in detail all the plants they saw, they usually dismissed the *Utricularia* as “some yellow flowering utrics.”

With the 1989 publication of Peter Taylor’s *Utricularia* monograph, the landscape changed. Finally, in one place, we had a complete tabulation of all the *Utricularia* known, described in a consistent and uniform format. What a huge boon to science! “Taylor” was a challenge for my remedial knowledge of nomenclature, but I rose to the challenge and it became my constant companion. I literally read it cover to cover, species after species, like a novel. However silly this might have been, it shaped my understanding of *Utricularia* (and botany in general). The genus was fascinating because, while it was so big and complex, Taylor made it tractable to my methodical (if pedantic) mind.

One day in 1990, filled with enthusiasm and undeserved confidence, I wrote a letter to Taylor—in this case, Taylor the botanist and not Taylor the book. My letter was not very insightful; rather it was mostly filled with trivial thoughts, questions about the genus, and compliments about his monograph. I mailed it to him with the same feelings you might have in writing to a movie star—I was confident I would never hear from him. Much to my extreme pleasure, he quickly wrote back.

Peter Taylor wrote back!

And thus started several years of correspondence between us. To this day, I am astonished that he persisted in writing to me during those years. After all, he was enormously busy, being involved in drafting countless publications; in comparison I was a graduate student struggling to settle upon even a general direction for my professional path. Yet he took the time to write, and to mentor. It is a tangible expression of his humanity.

During our correspondence, we talked about many things—scientific puzzles, projects, and ideas. I also discovered that Peter (as he allowed and encouraged me to call him) had a wonderful sense of humor that came across the page marvelously. For example, he described a time in the USA when he needed an eraser—he visited a store and asked for a “rubber,” and was given something very different from what he expected! (Some of his other jokes are not appropriate for CPN!)

We quickly discovered we had a shared interest in device design and construction. In my graduate work I was using computer-aided design software and machine-shop equipment to fabricate a remotely controlled instrument that I would later use in my research with major mountaintop telescopes. Peter related that he had assembled a fully equipped and ever-enlarging metal workshop, and in it he built, among other things, harpsichords. Harpsichords! I point out that when Peter would

build something—bookcases, ornamental turning slide-rests, or other obscure devices—he would often start from raw materials, including wood from trees he had harvested from his own property.

The man would start with trees! And end up with harpsichords!

His attention to construction detail and craftsmanship was extraordinary—one of his turning slide-rests took several hundred hours to design and construct (and won him a silver cup at an annual meeting of the Society of Ornamental Turners). He also took pride in carefully preparing planks of “brown oak” harvested from his woods; I learned from him that this kind of timber is produced by *Quercus robur* that has been attacked by a fungus. This disease results in the normally pale wood being attractively dark brown, but otherwise the wood is left unimpaired in strength and working characteristics. With his busy schedule many of his projects took a long time to complete—he noted that his wife had been patiently awaiting the construction of a small element of furniture (from elm) for 15 years! But this was all fine with him—if one of his projects developed a temporary obstacle, he had many others to advance.

He obviously approached the construction of his *Utricularia* monograph the same way. The work spanned 40 years of labor, and was meticulously crafted.

Unfortunately, over the following years, Peter reported increasing problems with illness—not only his own, but also in his family. However, this was offset in part with delights, such as the arrival of his granddaughter. Despite obvious challenges in his personal situation he retained a positive outlook. Meanwhile, I had obtained my Ph.D. and had decided to leave astronomy to work for The Nature Conservancy. He encouraged my change in career.

At the same time I began my new career, I also took on many responsibilities helping to edit CPN. Stupidly, I stopped writing to Peter. This was a mistake. Despite the occasional free moments here and there, I never did write him again. This too was a mistake. Only when Martin Cheek at Kew wrote to me of Peter’s passing, did I fully realize how unwisely I had squandered my time.

I think that Peter would be happy to hear that I have fused my interests and now work as an astrobiologist during the academic session, and a botanist (largely focusing on *Utricularia*) on my breaks in the academic year. And, having taken a page from Peter’s generosity, I always reply to letters from beginners. I always try to find that time.

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